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Writing Sample

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Includes "REQUIEM FOR THE LIVING."

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Alan Cherchesov

REQUIEM FOR THE LIVING

Perhaps Time as such does not exist at all, and instead there is only an endless web of endless stories, tracing patterns in the deafening silence of Eternity? Perhaps Time is but a means of retelling them and listening to them? Perhaps it is not stories that grow out of Time, but Time that grows out of stories?

Of course I remember. How could I forget? I was fifteen when he left us, and the whole story of his time with us has long since settled in my memory and been smoothed over, like butter in a tub or a cavity in your mouth after the tooth has been extracted. You only start really to appreciate the tooth once it's gone, only then do you realise why it was necessary and your tongue keeps feeling the gap as if it can't believe it and keeps checking whether it's only imagining it, until it tires and reconciles itself to the loss. And for how many days afterwards do you look straight at people's mouths before noticing anything else? Isn't that always the way? That's it. It's like that for everyone. For those, that is, who are normal, ordinary people. Of course, everyone has their quirks, but then again oddities are there to set off the normal. Yet when the normal gets left far behind that's no longer just a few quirks! That is one's nature itself, and not some offshoot of it.

That's what I'm driving at: he certainly wasn't ordinary. Maybe he was for the first ten years of his life or the tiniest bit longer. His father and mother were caught in a mudslide together with his father's brother, who had a narrow escape but lost his voice, and with his voice his mind. They say he lost the use of his legs as well from fear; only I don't know that for sure and can't remember because I was only born twenty odd years later. But, if that's what they say, something of that sort must have happened to the man, the uncle of the boy. Alone. At any rate, when the whole family fled from the aul¹, this uncle was trussed to a buffalo back to back because he could not sit on it due to his bulk. He was as fat, they say, as a three-year old pig, ate and ate all the time, as if in place of a voice and a mind the gods had granted him two extra stomachs to add to the one nature had given him, by right, and which worked no worse than anybody else's, and probably much better because, as they say, even with three stomachs you can't grow that fat. And so they strapped his hulk onto the buffalo's hump, seated the afsin² with the women and children in the wagon, while the old man and his two other sons mounted horses, three of the five stolen, the best in the whole gorge. And, so the story goes, when they fled, no one said a word to them for fear of defiling their tongues and ears, they only followed them with their gazes up to the bend in the road, as far as the dim light of the dawn would allow. Then they went their separate ways back to their homes and began to wait. After a few hours, ten horsemen appeared in their yard, five of whom were brothers and who had, in the course of one night, lost their horses and travelled more than a dozen miles on foot and then galloped no less a distance

¹ Aul – mountain village

² Afsin - elder mother in the family

on borrowed mares. It was at that point, I believe, looking at these men and reading doom in their eyes, that everyone envied the thieves. Honest people often envy thieves, particularly successful thieves, but do not admit it, instead substituting this envy for contempt. Except that envy and contempt are just like meat and salt, the best partners. And so when the brothers said that beyond the mountain pass they already had one blood feud, everyone was jealous of the fugitives, for they had turned out to be successful thieves. And if, as Grandfather told me, they had left behind their homes and land, it was but a small sacrifice. For a sacrifice, he said, requires a real loss, and they had only exchanged home for horses, the best in the gorge. Anyhow, their plot of land was tiny – you dropped your cloak and covered their acres. So it was no great loss, and even if it was, its scent had wafted away on the wind. For the wind always blows at the back of thieves.

So said Grandfather. They must have been lucky thieves – that much I worked out for myself.

The villagers came to hate the thieves even more, and that hate was keener than the silence that had accompanied their flight. But it was still not as strong as the hate that looked down at them from those mares, dazed from so many miles covered for nothing, and now witnessed by the villagers in their despondency. And therefore this other hate, silently staring from borrowed mares, was far more dangerous than their own, alleviated by envy and relit by the desire to cover it up, overlook it, reject it – the envy, that is, and disavow it, and at the same time to disassociate themselves from the whole thing, born and now thriving on the land, where none of the locals had ever stolen or even considered you could get away with it until then, and so spectacularly and deftly and with such impunity. So to stop it once and for all, this danger and, moreover, this envy and awareness of it, a step needed to be taken, an action, a word. Something needed to be done, anything that would look if not useless then harmless, if not noble then not cowardly; mainly it should be a step in the right direction. It was at this point that the old man Khandjeri invited them into his home, having fenced himself off from the danger with tradition and thus transformed ten embittered men firstly into ten weary travellers and then into ten becalmed and contented guests.

It should have been over there and then – not for them of course, not for the strangers, but for the aul, who had already paid their dues – because Khandjeri told them at once, those ten, about the land and the house that, he said, by right belonged to the guests, and not at all to the aul nor to the previous owners; though it may not be much land, he said, we are law-abiding and respect justice; those thieves don't even have any relatives here and so no one here is answerable for them, apart from their own walls and their land, and he hoped that the Almighty would punish them and man had to put his trust in Heaven. In sum, he said everything that goes without saying anyway, what had been obvious since the dawn, and now the evening shadows were drawing in. What would happen next, anyone could guess: from the senile old man to the youngest babe, if only the gods had not deprived the former of his memory and had furnished the latter with the power of speech, even I knew it, though I was only born fifteen odd years later, by virtue of being the son of my father and the grandson of my Grandfather, since there flowed in me half the blood of the one and a quarter of the blood of the other – to predict it even a single drop of their blood would have been enough. So now they should have gotten up and left, having declined the invitation to stay the night and having said their thank you's for the food and drink. They should have mounted their borrowed mares – five of them – and made their way back the fifteen miles

to their aul, and returned here in the morning with their equipment and bullock-carts so as to load flagstones from the abandoned house, to substitute vengeance for work and keep their hands out of mischief. That is what should have happened, and everyone thought that that was what would happen. And those ten were already getting up to leave and had already declined the offer of staying on, and had already made the last toast, and even emptied their wine-horns, but then it happened.

No, I don't mean to say that someone had forgotten about his being orphaned. They remembered about it the whole time, and that is why, probably, they had forgotten about it since the string of carts with his whole family disappeared in silence beyond the road bend. Now they remembered in a flash, as soon as they saw him in Khandjeri's yard with his hands tied behind his back, covered in roadside dust, not much taller than his own shadow on the trampled earth. The fear in his eyes was far greater than his shadow, and his height, and the bloodshot scar of the sun in the sky where it had been lanced by the mountaintops. When they remembered they did not need it to be explained where he was found or why he had returned. Where else if not by the gravestones and why else he returned save for the same reason. And so it was that the reasons why became clear to all immediately. The only thing to find out was where he had hidden the horse. Even this was soon found out though the boy, they say, never confessed to anything, persisting in his thievery and crazed from fear. When Khandjeri's son found the horse in the dusk beyond the bend in the road and brought it back into the yard saddled and handed over the bridle to the eldest of the ten horsemen, and he mounted this horse that had now been stolen twice in the course of a day, they tied the boy to one of the mares, now freed, and took him to where they swore they would finish him off within three days if four more horses were not added to the one under the elder. Only Khandjeri told them right there and then that that could not be, that such thieves do not fall into traps and all that, and that the boy was an orphan, a child, the son of a worthy father, and younger than his years but cleverer than his own mind, and when all was said and done, even if unwillingly, one of their five horses had been returned, and as such they had to let him go. But the older of the ten did not agree and also took refuge in tradition, as Khandjeri had himself a few hours before, only of course, that was another tradition, well known to all. It seems traditions exist solely so people can shield themselves with them. So our men did not rescue the boy. Of course, few believed they would kill him, or, as was the custom, make an incision on his ear. Most of them were inclined to think that he would be made their servant or farmhand. Of course all were certain in their minds that he would remain there with them – that's what should have happened in any event. That's the way it should have ended – for our aul and for those others. But as I've already said, he was by no means ordinary. If you will, that day the ordinary in him fell away from him like a ragged old coat. Or like time, grown weary with age. That's the way it is: you live and breathe, and then you suddenly feel that the time is gone, has moved off, torn you away from yourself and even given you the chance to see yourself from the outside, even though you did not wish it, but then you look at your former self from the outside and there's nothing you can do about it. Time has tired and worn out, receding of its own accord into the past, and new times have taken its place sniffing you out blindly with greedy nostrils. And that's how it should be, for each and all, though it's rarely the same for each and all.

Only three days later that is precisely what happened, with time, and it stung each and everyone to the quick: three days later he returned, with a knife in place of a dagger and a little basket of food, and he settled in the empty house where even cats no longer strayed. The eldest of the ten brought him back on the same bullock-cart that had done its work so

well, carrying off day after day the superstructures and the flagstones. It turns out that he, the eldest, also did not especially believe in miracles, rather, he saw earlier than the others the past peeling off and within three days broke his custom with it, or at least hit upon that newness which arrived in its place. Then one of those two, the boy or the elder, decided to share this newness and harness a mule to the bullock-cart, and make the same journey for the umpteenth time to put between them a distance of many miles so as to have done with it all, and to turn over a new leaf. So for the aul it turned out very differently from how we had expected, and it all began quite differently from how our men had calculated it, observing silently how the boy nodded to them and then unhurriedly went into the empty yard and from there into the empty house, already sprinkled with mould and not ready for him, just like the aul in fact, dumbfounded and vainly clutching at the slippery slice of broken off time. No more than an hour later, everyone gawks at the boy who goes out of his yard and heads for the neighbouring one, ours that is, calls out to my grandfather and speaks to him about a rifle without lead and powder versus the harvest, and my grandfather can only look at him, saying nothing, and then of course, can no longer hold back and asks why, and he, no bigger than his own shadow on my grandfather's boots, frowns and grows angry and threatens to make his proposal to someone more compliant, and Grandfather no longer vacillates, but tries to figure out in his mind – he often spoke of this himself – how much six sevenths of the boy's harvest, not yet collected, would be, but in any case that was already more than an old rifle without powder, and even more than shame for such an uneven bargain; he goes back into our house and brings it out, and he can't even hold it properly but takes it and proudly walks back, without once turning his head and without returning the look that followed him. The next morning, shortly after sunrise, once again he stops outside our gates and again calls for my grandfather to say that he's made a mistake. An eighth part, he says, I need only an eighth part, and not a seventh, from each threshing, but now there should be also a sheepskin jacket and some mats into the bargain. So Grandfather again goes into our house and brings it out, and he takes them without looking and disappears into his damp walls. Damp, they say, because no smoke was seen from there. There was no smoke for six days, so they say, and the first two days he left the bowl of food untouched on his doorstep, and afterwards it was also left there, but only towards evening and empty. In his eyes, they say, there was neither malice nor warmth. It was already then that they named him Alone, and the name stuck, squeezing out his real name, which few had known: who remembers the name of every little kid? Once normality ends a name is no longer of any use, as names are designed for others, for everyday folk. After six days he made it clear that was not enough. So they thought of another: Man-Child. Because after six days he appeared on the street with his knife at his belt and walked through the aul straight towards the nykhas³; he only stopped once he'd come right up to it. Our people didn't understand a thing at first, and so, they say, he had to greet them three times and tell them about the fire in his newly lit fireplace. (At first they did not notice the smoke rising above his house, but at last they saw it and understood and rose from their places at the nykhas – the most wizened elders in the aul – and accepted him, and pointed out his place on the honoured bench; he seated himself, and after that – here's the thing! – only after he had sat down did they return to their seats. Not one of them, they say, burst out laughing: that look in his eyes stopped them, and who knows if they even laughed later.)

So he came to stay – Man-Child. After that our aul had to figure out what had happened. It was figured out at once that he had to have been orphaned, and then waited

³ Nykhas – village forum where the elders discussed the affairs of the village.

for six months for his grandfather once removed and his uncles to become horse thieves and set themselves up with the fastest of treasures, so as to then saddle their treasure, and harness their success, and flee with them beyond the mountain pass to where their pursuers already had other blood feuds; they also worked out that the boy himself had to have stolen one of those five horses and galloped on it to the abandoned graves, so as to be trapped there and await death for three days; and after this he had to return and exchange almost all the harvest from his land for an unloaded rifle, sheepskin jacket and some mats. As for the six days, they could not figure them out, so they had to do more thinking.

The old men pondered on the gun and the fire in the hearth – it never occurred to anyone simply to ask, how could they if each of them was at least fifty years older than the boy, and as many times more experienced. It hindered them, their experience, since what had happened did not figure in it. But the new name, Man-Child, had already come into being. Then one of them – perhaps it was Khandjeri or my Grandfather – realized that he could be conveniently divided into two, and the boy could be forgotten for the time being so as to concentrate on the man, the more so since he – the boy, man, mystery – duly came to the nykhas every day and sat next to them on the bench with such an expression on his face that it never occurred to anyone to laugh, joke or protest. That's it. He sat there not merely as the owner of a khadzar⁴ and a plot of land but as the head of an entire household, a whole clan, of which he was now the only representative. All the same, for six days he had been waiting for something and doing something before he lit the fire in the hearth, fastened a knife to his belt, for want of a dagger, and came to the nykhas. Then they remembered the graves and thought about the gun, and they sent to the Blue Road to check; when they had checked it was confirmed, because there were indeed traces and the grass was cropped by just as much as a horse would need – any horse, even the best in the gorge – for a whole night.

When they figured it all out and their conjectures had been confirmed, they could easily reconstruct the rest. They had figured out that not only had the boy been orphaned, not only had he fled with the thieves and then stolen himself, not only had he been condemned, then spared, and come back home, but also that he had waited for six nights in the dark graveyard with his unloaded rifle until one of the thieves came for him and believed that the weapon was loaded, and failed to persuade him, and left that place forever empty-handed, secretly at sunrise, defeated and resigned to his fate. Only now could he – the boy, man, mystery – legitimise his solitude and as a rightful owner light the fire in the cold hearth and fasten to his belt a knife, for want of a dagger, and get the elders to look at the rising smoke, acknowledge this smoke and rise up to accept him. They also figured out the eighth part of the harvest and that it would not be the last deal he'd make and, consequently, not the last bargain my Grandfather would get off him. And so it came to pass that in his tenth year, or thereabouts – and those years were more the years of a man than a child – he set up his own household, a really substantial piece of property, the only individually owned and managed household in the whole aul, as if thievery had played into his hands, as if his solitude were a boon. But it came to pass also that an eighth of the harvest was actually far, far more than had been originally intended for him, only a week previously no one had calculated how much it would be but now they had: that property would have been shared out among one old man, two strong men and another, their stricken brother (a piece of lard swaddled in a jacket, the walking belly with the voracity of a three-year-old boar), as well as all their

⁴ Khadzar – house

children and wives, not counting the afsin and those of their clan that had yet to be born. Now there was just him. And as such it came to pass that our family, that had gained much from the deal, had still not gained as much as he, and had in fact even lost.

"He has hired us," Grandfather told me, gazing tiredly at our neighbour's fencing as the sun quietly warmed his brittle shoulders and dried the water in his eyes. "He has done us a favour but he has also exploited us. He has thrown us alms and demanded in return that we feed his solitude. He has made farmhands out of us."

According to the terms of our agreement his part of every threshing went straight to his barn, and all he had to do was open the doors. So he could sit at the village nykhas longer than anyone, even during the heat of the harvest season as if he were the wealthiest of the wealthy and the laziest of the indolent. But he was not lazy. Far from it. That we all understood afterwards, once we realised what he was preparing himself for. But that was later. He left us thirty years later. By that time he had acquired not only a horse and some sheep, not only the finest tools and bullock-cart, but also his own maturity, unlike that of any other, and he would not sacrifice even a drop of the aloneness that had earned him all these.

Yes, aloneness had made him what he was, standing in opposition to all of us and deprived of anyone's love. It made him a stranger to this land where he had been born and where he grew up, where he lived for forty years, having only gone away once for a mere three days, to meet his own death, and returned here as soon as he had escaped it. Only fate prepared him for something quite different, and once he had steeled himself, he set out. Of course I remember how he left. And I remember all that led up to it.

He fooled us yet again, and my grandfather in the first place; it wasn't only him, Grandfather, but also all the others who expected the next bargain from him to fall into our hands, and they were all thinking that it wouldn't be long in coming because, except for the empty khadzar and a patch of land, he had nothing; surely a gun without cartridges and a sheepskin coat for the winter were not much even for a boy of ten. My grandfather was more impatient than most, naturally, tormented by his burden like a woman about to go into labour. He even thought of a little trick to whip him up and force his hand. He set out on his own to the fort with a dozen aurochs' pelts, returning without them; he held fire for a whole week and didn't say a word to anyone. As Grandfather's patience finally broke, he called my father inside and produced from under his bed a thin bundle, and Father understood at once and trembled with hurt, sensing some malign intent as if he felt, he told me, that it would all come to no good, that we would only disgrace ourselves. Grandfather unfolded the bundle and held it out to my father, and Father told me he had never seen anything finer – although he'd seen greater beauty – and never would again (I think maybe he did but never held it in his hands.) Grandfather must have taken something else apart from those pelts, and that something paid for the workmanship and now sparkled so that it hurt Father's eyes, and shame mounted on shame for my father until he had a lump in his throat. Grandfather told him to take off his old dagger, and he took it off, and to fasten on the new one: "Wear it for a while. Let him see it. And him without a dagger too."

Father nodded and left, and when he walked down the street towards the nykhas, he thought the whole way (he told me this himself) about how he wouldn't be able to bear it, and yet at the same time he would of course but that was really tough. He thought (I'm only guessing) that now he too was poisoned, the same as Grandfather, and that from this poison both they and the whole aul would have a hard time healing. Maybe he thought –

made himself think – it would all work out, it would all come off and the old man would turn out to be smarter than his sons.

He had to stroll to and fro past the nykhas, Father said, about seven times, but the boy just sat there alone casting his short shadow and staring at Father, frowning and silent, while the sweat cascaded off Father's brow and his boots squelched up to his ankles, while the boy just watched him in silence, as though he were watching some old nag being paraded before him, and Father said he was cursed if he wasn't then a stricken horse, an old one too. Father said that it wasn't that the boy in him was not stirred as he watched, he remained quite cold while before him they were taking out this horse, harnessed with a simple rawhide strap and loaded with a silver sword and scabbard. And so we didn't succeed in the slightest, nothing worked and the old man had to rack his brains again. It was then, said Father, that grandfather remembered about the donkey. He made us rub it clean, scrub it and scrape it as if it were some royal ambler, everything short of anointing it with oil and brushing its teeth. Then each of us brothers, said Father, rode three times a day to the spring for water for the sole purpose of riding past the boy's khadzar and the nykhas where he might be sitting. What the idea with that donkey was I don't know: what use was the donkey when twenty pounds of silver had gone unnoticed?

Then it was the sheep's turn, and we had to hurry because the harvest had almost all been collected, the threshing time was approaching, and it had to be done before then. So the old man picked the sheep out and started to fatten it up and mollycoddle it as if he were preparing it for slaughter. We brought their grass to them in the yard, so they didn't shed any fat while out in pasture. By then the threshing was done and still he didn't appear. Grandfather sent his other son to his house to invite him to dinner. So then, said Father, came his brother's turn to get drenched in sweat. Except that we'd once again been deceived. Uncle returned and related the whole conversation to the old man, word for word. Or rather, not the conversation, more the speech, for he hadn't managed to get a word in edgeways and only now started talking.

"Sheep he'll need in summer. I didn't tell him anything about them; he went off on that track all by himself. Says he'll get hold of them by summer without us. And for now, he says, he doesn't need anything. Then he asks when it's time to open up the barn. I didn't know what to answer so I only looked at him suppressing a yawn. I just stood there and said nothing."

And then, said Father, the old man started to shake. He just sat there and shook in full sight of everyone, and we could all see that he wasn't shaking with laughter. Father thought that the old man was really in bad shape. Looks like some kind of fever. He probably thought that this disease was more dangerous than any fever, and he knew also that it didn't stop with the old man, for he himself and his brother were no less affected, and there was no cure to be had for any of them. In the morning they filled up the sacks and he had only to open the doors of his barn. So he had won again.

They said he would sit for days on end at the nykhas cleaning his fingernails with his knife and silently looking this way and that, leaving the nykhas only to throw some more brushwood on his fire. But at that time there were still those in our aul who believed that he was awake – the boy in him that is. There were doubters, but no one would dare voice their doubts openly. So you just had to wait, given that, as they say, everything comes to those

who wait. Just how true this was would be proved to us soon enough, but in a very different way than the one we'd expected. From that time, they say, no one was daft enough to think that he'd ever lose or give in, even if he wanted to. When that morning, stumbling and limping, he made his way to the nykhas, everyone not only heard or knew but saw it also, if you will, how he gave in and surrendered, not especially defending himself, not trying to fight back, how he was beaten up, vanquished and trampled upon, and yet he had the upper hand. They saw how in the middle of the road he was surrounded by their own grandchildren and great-grandchildren and their children, but he still walked on, not slowing his pace and not quickening it, as if he didn't notice; how he was confronted by this living wall, but even then made no move to push it, hit it, or at least protect himself. He didn't cry out once, taking the punches together with their fury and trying with all his might not to fall down. Finally he did fall, collapsed to the ground knocked down by dozens of fists and a hot wave of his assailants' breath. Their breathing grew louder and hotter, the blows missed their target, aiming at his stubborn silence, and their breathing broke off into a scream of frenzied children's voices, frenzied at first from shock, then from malice, and then from fear, and not one of those grown men knew who was what or where in their stupor and sweat, and couldn't utter a word, let alone get close or intercede, for at first it was somehow too early to do so and everyone was waiting, and then suddenly it was too late – it became clear he had again deceived them, all of them: grandsons and old men, sons and fathers, by not having uttered a sound, and not moving to defend himself. When the brawlers had lost their nerve and run off, when he had been left lying in the blackening dust and red twilight, they still needed a bit more time to get a hold of themselves and shake the torpor off their shoulders. But no sooner had they approached him – this filthy little body on the black earth – than they all froze. For he was already back on his feet, and what's more, he was again walking homewards, heavily but evenly, expansively and unbowed, like a buffalo under plough. A tiny little buffalo... It was like a miracle and lasted no more than a moment: first he was sprawled out, then he got up and walked on. Just as if they'd all dreamt it, as if he hadn't really been lying on his back in the middle of the road, and had not even stopped.

Now, watching him the next morning make his way up the street, each of them at the nykhas was hoping that he would keep silent. Only he wasn't silent for long – just for as long as it took him to get his breath back and wipe the sweat from his brow – and this is what they heard:

"That'll be the last time. There will be no more of that."

Then for a long time again nothing was heard, until he said:

"You can tell them, in any crowd there is a leader. He who takes the first step or he who appears to take it. Let them know, the leader, and the other that appears to be one, there will be no more of that. You can tell them that you saw my blade, and I swore on my blade that that would be the last time."

Then they listened to his silence again. They say that on that day and the two that followed not a soul let their children outside. And he, with wounds cleared, and sores dried, walked to the nykhas as before and did nothing else, warming himself in the sun and picking with his blade at his clean fingernails. Every morning, as before, he grabbed the food bowl and jug of ale left for him on his doorstep, and put them back towards evening. He felt no malice, no gratitude, and no contempt.

But towards winter, something changed. He had clearly become bored and restless. One day he came to my grandfather and asked:

"How many cartridges would I get for a hare? Or, really, well, what's the price of a hare in terms of that stuff with which it is killed?"

Grandfather was quiet for a while and then said:

"It varies. Depends on how many times you have to fire."

The boy nodded.

"That's why I'm asking," he says. "It makes sense to work out how many cartridges it would cost to go down into the forest, hunt out a hare, shoot it and bring it back to someone who hadn't gone down there, hadn't hunted it out and shot it and who hadn't spent what it takes to lay his hands on a dead hare, not just the energy, but also the time. Maybe you know?"

Grandfather thought for a bit and answered:

"I may venture a guess."

"What's your guess? Probably quite a bit?" the boy asked.

"Not that much." Grandfather said. "Just that everyone will work out their price differently, in their own way, and each time they'll give you as many cartridges as the hare will actually be worth."

The boy squinted at Grandfather as if he were estimating how much the old man himself would cost. Only the thing was, as Grandfather told us, you couldn't tell what he was converting me into: hares or cartridges.

Finally the boy nodded and said:

"Agreed. Name your price."

The old man called out one of his sons and ordered him to bring lead and powder for four cartridges, and when he had brought them, Grandfather poured them into the nimble outstretched palm, which then disappeared, and then, as Grandfather said, reappeared, only empty. And Grandfather said:

"If the hare stays in the forest, then there'll be little gain for the one who didn't go down there, didn't go hunting, and didn't even miss it, the one who didn't expend any energy on this or waste any of his time. If the hare remains in the forest, then the one who didn't venture down there will remember at once about the four cartridges and will want something in return. If you will, he will ask for an extra part from the next threshing of the harvest."

"Well I didn't think that a harvest could have so many parts to it," said the boy. "Did you?"

They both were silent for just as long as it took for the young guest's eyes to tire of the old man's craggy face. Then the boy said:

"OK. Deal. Just show me how it's done."

Grandfather did show him, and told him how to aim, and even greased the rifle with a marrow so that the bargain was all fairly done, for he was almost certain that now he had seized his chance, it would all work out. When a man knows almost for certain that something will work out he feels that everything needs to be fair – albeit only superficially, only from one angle.

When he had gone Grandfather called out to my father and said:

"That'll do. Take it off now. Fasten the old one. It's too good for you. Or have you forgotten?"

Of course Father remembered, he had not forgotten even for a minute, and so fastened the old dagger to his belt without another word, but all the same blushed furiously. "As if he had shaved my moustache off," he said, "as if half my years had been taken away, as if they'd all laughed at me." But Grandfather wasn't interested in the slightest in what Father felt and how he looked at him. For the next two days they took the donkey to the

nearest spring as before, but Grandfather took no notice and didn't even look across the neighbouring fence, so little doubt did he have in the eventual outcome.

Only once did he go up to the nykhas and say something to those sitting there, wrapping their old age in their cloaks. As he came back down, he was even more confident and his eye shone with a serene light. Father thought for the first time, as he told me, about kindness and how it might look. Or rather he knew what it looked like, he'd already seen it, but he wasn't used to it. He'd not gotten used to thinking that his eyes could be so endlessly kind and not be embarrassed about it. Only, as Father said, he did not suspect there could be so much kindness in those eyes simply in advance of an expected victory. And so to keep out of harm's way he forbade himself to think about it.

On the third day the old man ordered pies to be cooked for dinner and waited in a good mood outside, gazing at the road and the sleepy sun overhead. By that time everyone knew of those words that he'd composed and then brought to the nykhas to be declaimed to those present so that he could then hold his peace.

He said something like this: when two people strike a deal, the third should stand aside. He simply stands to one side and looks on until they have done it, because this third party, if he's a fellow villager and knows the laws, won't argue with anyone over a purchase, even if he has something to sell as well. He won't begin to get in the way because he's a true fellow villager and envies no one; he is certainly a clever countryman too, and as such he knows that intelligence is always obvious and always valued, especially when both sides are pleased with their bargain and have already shaken hands on it.

He said something to that effect. No more and no less. Then Grandfather sat in the yard and waited for our guest to open the gate and admit for the first time that he had lost. We all waited as well, naturally. And not just us. In the rest of the aul too, there were not a few eyes and ears peeled. When he finally appeared in the distance, those at the nykhas already knew, but the old man didn't even move to get up, so sure was he. But we, Father told me, just stood alongside him in team formation though no one told us to. Each of us also tried not to look at him, but we didn't feel like talking either. Finally, our eyes got the better of us and we turned to look at him. As soon as we saw, we were struck dumb, we just looked from the old man to the road, and from the road back to the old man, who was as yet untouched by doubt. As Father said, he felt nothing but shame and a kind of malicious delight. Only the shame vanished faster, and as the boy approached only the malice remained, because we were all of us poisoned.

He came up to our yard, opened the gate and said to Grandfather:

"That'll be four more cartridges from you then."

That's all he said – four cartridges from you. Grandfather sat there and with all his might resisted what he was hearing, and was already past shaking as he'd done that time before. Then he silently nodded at my father to take the two hares from the boy's nimble hands. Grandfather nodded once more, and Father went inside for the powder and lead and poured them into his outstretched palm, just as before. Grandfather looked him straight in the eye and made a real effort to say something but the boy spoke instead:

"If you need another couple, you'd better pay right now. If you want to buy two more, give me another eight on top."

The old man gave the signal, and Father again had to go back inside and bring out the advance. Now the boy had lead and powder for a dozen cartridges. That is, if he'd used all four of the previous shots in catching those two hares, only now no one would bet on it.

When a few days later the boy again opened our gate, the old man bought all four new hares he'd paid for, and added to the marked price a further sixteen bullets and a bag of powder. For future hunting expeditions. The boy stood there in front of him, furrowing his brow and biting his lip, counting on his fingers and putting his bounty in his pockets. The old man looked at him, his arms limp at his sides, his head cocked, as if he were searching for something but to no avail, as if he'd forgotten what he was searching for.

And so it happened that their deal grew and multiplied like the slain hares in our yard, only it grew in the wrong direction. So now it turned out that to achieve his victory, Grandfather would have to buy all the hares in the entire forest and still be capable of putting down an advance for the same amount again; only no extra part from any harvest was worth that amount of lead and powder.

Grandfather knew this perfectly well, but for another fortnight he could not stop himself, all the more since no one else was stopping him. After all, no one had forgotten his speech at the nykhas, they had no wish to forget it. Only the boy himself could stop the old man now. (Or we could have, had the whole family gone off and shot hares from dawn to dusk without missing once. Only then we'd have to exchange all our land bit by bit for the lead and powder he'd accumulated.) Father said it all felt like giant millstones were at work pulverising all our lead and leaving behind hares' ears. No one knew when it would end, and so all we could do was put the world off again.

A fortnight later, however, our waiting took pity on us and let go: the splinter was extracted from our endless days as the boy reappeared.

He looked in towards evening, when the sun had withered and Grandfather was sitting out in the yard on his log bench covered with skins, looking, as was his wont, at the empty sky over the roadside. When he came in the old man didn't stir, didn't blink, as if he were rooted to that log, which we'd used to chop meat and firewood and which was now covered with skins for him every morning. The boy said:

"Alright. I'll give five back for every ram. Only I'll need them come summer."

Grandfather stayed still and didn't nod this time, so the boy had to say it again:

"Fifteen bullets for those three rams that you've fattened up so they're the envy of all the oxen. Bring them to me when it's warm again. But I'll pay you now. You'll find it easier to sell than to buy. What do you need so many hares for anyway?"

Grandfather's gaze was piercing the empty air, and he sat there motionless and silent, as if he hadn't been listening. The boy beckoned my father with his finger, and he obediently went to him and opened his palms, and then watched the boy shoot off with his shadow gaily leaping after him. Father went back inside, shoved the bag in the corner and drank water from the jug thirstily; it tasted as if he'd just run many miles. Grandfather sat outside, turning his back to the dusk and our pity, and it was as if he were at his own wake, though at that time we hadn't seen one yet. We all realized then that he'd given up and it was hard to see him that way, as if dragging a fully laden ox-cart up a mountain.